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ABSTRACT

A doctoral student's interest in self-culture connections led her to observe an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing class focused on autobiography and read all the students' papers. Autobiographical writing not only gives ESL students a chance to write about what matters to them, but the teacher can capitalize on students' cultural differences and their awareness of ideologies. The generic flexibility of autobiography allowed ESL students to explore all connections in their lives, so they made various rhetorical choices to present their self images. One group of seven students wrote life stories that had a trajectory of "coming to the United States," with an emphasis of the significance of English for their future. A "double consciousness" was evident in the accounts of a group of immigrant students who came to the United States in their early teens. These students tried to say something less "sayable" because when relocated in a different culture as young children, they lost their original identities and became "marginal." Older writers--in their early and late twenties--more consciously articulated the relation of their experiences to ideologies. Since the students wrote about what they cared for, they got more involved in the process of making themselves understood, which is central to literacy. The students' willingness to make connections went beyond writing: many saw their purposes in life more clearly in their later revisions, as writing autobiography helped them "envision" their future by recalling their past. (Contains 19 references and 5 notes. (RS)

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ESL Students Writing Autobiographies: Are There Any Connections?

Ruoyi Wu

Students write meaningful papers when they are allowed to explore various connections in writing. ESL students, however, have few opportunities to do so. To illustrate this problem, I want to invite you first to listen to a conversation among some writing teachers and ESL students[1]:

ESL Students A, B, and C: Could you please tell us how we can write good papers in English?
Expressivist: Try to be yourself, for writing "with real voice is writing into which someone has breathed."
ESL Student A: Are you saying that I should redefine myself, for in my culture, "I" is not capitalized or "glorious"?
ESL Writing Researcher A: I can see why you cannot talk to each other. L1 (first language) writing theories are "largely monolingual, monocultural, ethnocentric." I found through reading 72 empirical reports that "L2 writers' texts were less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)"...
ESL Student B: Do you mean we should study grammar every day? I have problems understanding all the rules. My mind is "a blank" whenever an instructor teaches grammar.
ESL Researcher B: No, he doesn't mean only grammar. What you need is "more of everything."
Social Constructionist: Why don't you consider any social and ideological aspects of ESL pedagogy?
ESL Researcher C: We cannot do that, because L2 writing requires us to emphasize "the cognitive, academic, and pedagogical" more than "the sociopolitical, which usually only gathers momentum when other explanations appear inadequate."
Social Constructionist: But...
ESL Student C: No wonder I cannot make friends with American students. I guess I am "not good enough" for them...

This conversation is not completely fictional, for I "overheard" it while researching from published literature in composition studies and the ESL writers I studied last year. With juxtaposed perspectives, the conversation reveals some glaring gaps in our

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knowledge making. While writing specialists are busy building "categorical walls," ESL students are excluded from other groups because of their linguistic and cultural differences. On one hand, neither expressivism nor social constructionism in L1 (first language) theory answers the needs of the ESL writing class, given their Western tendency to dichotomize self and society and personal and academic discourse. Pedagogy based on such epistemology can be nothing but ethnocentric, as Fan Shen--a student from China--found through his experience that learning to write in the U. S., he had to "accept the way a Westerner sees himself in relation to the universe and society" (461). On the other hand, L2 (second language) researchers recognize this incongruity, but many of them are limited by their linguistic paradigm to see some crucial similarities between L1 and L2 writing[2]. Their attention to ESL students' inability to write and cultural backgrounds justify a pedagogical focus on academic discourse more than either "self-reflection" or writing that explores ideological issues. Even the process approach which is so popular among L1 practitioners has been controversial in L2 writing[3]. As an ESL writer myself trained in rhetoric and composition, I agree that ESL students have their special needs, but what seems problematic to me is the L2 researchers' view of language as an apolitical medium and the disconnections they make among self, culture, writing, life, and ideology. As a result, ESL students are given fewer choices in writing than native speakers.

My interest in self-culture connections led me to observe, last fall, one ESL writing class focused on autobiography, and read all their papers together with various theories about the writer's self. The students were asked to write five chapters, each of which covered one aspect of their lives. I realized, though I had not intended at first, that the extended project of autobiographical writing--not personal essays--did allow ESL students to pro[illegible]e both personally and culturally meaningful papers, which could clearly break some of the boundaries I have described above. Far from purely "personal," the students' autobiography derived its "authenticity" from the connections the writers made, between self and society, culture and culture, experience and ideology, and writing and life. In the rest of the paper, I will use more voices--especially those of the ESL writers in my study and some feminist critics of autobiography--to complicate the early conversation. My purpose is theoretical as well as pedagogical: as far as teaching goes, autobiographical writing not only gives ESL students a chance to write about what matters to them, but the teascher can capitalize on students' cultural differences and their awareness of ideologies; besides, since autobiography can serve as "a medium for working through contradictions" in life (Felski 78), and sharing experiences can help ESL writers relate to each other, life-writing can be used as a means of survival for all those who experience culture shock. Theoretically, both these ESL students' writing and feminist critics' stress on ideology and historical specificity

can deconstruct the self/society polarity debated by expressive and social rhetoricians and the boundaries some ESL theorists build between L1 and L2 writers. Following Sidonie Smith's use of women's autobiography in Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body, I attempt, in this paper, to provide my reading of the students' texts as "talking back" to theories that categorize them as writers.

Based on my preliminary analysis, I found that the generic flexibility of autobiography allowed the ESL students to explore all connections in their lives, so they made various rhetorical choices to present their self-images. In turn, writer-centered texts led to a student-centered writing class, as the students were actively involved in communicating with others in meaningful ways. Reading their texts, I observed a parallel between their life stories and those of women examined by such feminists as Susan Stanford Friedman and Carolyn G. Heilbrun: neither group as a whole had what Georges Gusdorf, a traditional critic, calls the "autobiographical consciousness"--seeing oneself as an individual apart from society--and both are excluded from consideration by traditional criticism. More fluid than I had expected, the writers' selves were located as shifting on a continuum between American culture and their own, depending on their experiences in both countries. Frequently, their in-between positions served as a major rhetorical point of reference from which they could speak with authenticity, for such positions helped justify their lives to their readers--in this case, the class with mixed cultures and

an instructor who was American.

One group--approximately seven students--wrote life-stories that clearly had a trajectory of "Coming to the U. S.," with an emphasis on the significance of English for their future. At one extreme was a student from Japan who completely identified with Americans, for her endless struggle and failure to enter college in her country had made her feel like an outsider. Interestingly enough, though she had gone through many hardships in her study here, she never mentioned any in her autobiography. Her position between cultures, however, was inevitably reflected in a "dual consciousness," which Friedman identifies in narratives by women and other minorities: "the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription" (39). In her case, the two selves defined by her own culture and by Americans made her combine the two in the last chapter. Here, she used the concept of "Wakon Yasai" which originated in 1800s--Wakon was the Japanese spirit while Yasai meant ideas from the West--to justify her struggle to grasp English and to make her study in the U. S. meaningful to her audience. Contrary to this Japanese student, a South American student identified with her people while telling all the hardships she had met while studying in the U. S. Always denoting herself with a collective "we" instead of "I," she saw herself as representative of her culture, so every obstacle she encountered became a challenge and her frustrations in learning English in the U. S. made her appreciate her family even more.

Similarly, others in this group employed the theme of how to

overcome hardships in learning English. Their dual consciousness correlated to their culture shock, part of which came from their encounter with a different educational system on a daily basis. Some mentioned Americans' misunderstanding of them while others narrated their gradual understanding of Americans. One student remembered her painful experience of crying in front of a teacher. In her country, she wrote, students didn't "speak up in class," but here she had to do it. The problem was "the more I tried to state my opinion in front of the other students, the more my mouth was shut." The humiliation in learning a second language, together with a pride in what they had achieved, was apparent in many autobiographies.

The double consciousness Friedman describes was most obvious in the accounts of a group of immigrant students who came to this country in their early teens and who usually attended high school in the U. S. As a group, these students tried to say something less "sayable" because when relocated in a different culture as young children, they had lost their original identities and become "marginal," their selves often recategorized in racial terms which they could not immediately understand. Consequently, their autobiographies, like black women's, "defy any apolitical reading" (Fox-Genovese 66). For instance, one Korean student described how he had been "made fun of" by American students in high school simply because he was an Asian who didn't speak good English. Even the most Americanized student in the class could not forget his lonely high school days, and showed a split in his

sense of self when he mentioned that he "got caught up in being a [sic] American instead of being myself."

Donald C. Goellnicht's analysis of the autobiographies of Kogawa and Kingston can help us understand how such a split can happen. He thinks immigrant girls become "divided subjects" between the new "father land" and the old "mother tongue" as a consequence of "cultural and linguistic dislocations based on racial difference," and for Kogawa and Kingston, it is "a psychic and social dislocation rather than a physical one" (124). Such a psychic dislocation was best expressed by a girl from Taiwan in her poem called "Faith," which appeared in her last chapter after she had written all the happy memories about her native land. The poem was a "miniature" of her first two years of life in an alienating country:

Outside of the window
the violent wind is howling wildly
The guiding needle in the heart
starts to tremble

I brace myself to open the door
The chilly air seeps through my coat
Freezes my every cell

Dark
is like a homeless spirit
floats to everywhere
I clasp my books nervously
speed up my gait

The sly curve of the moon
shines her sharp blade
She raises the angle of her mouth
jeers at my little shadow

The nightmarish setting represented the "inner" landscape of the young writer--her fear and insecurity: it was "chilly" with a

"violent wind"; darkness mirrored her "homeless spirit"; even the moon was hostile to her "little" self. In spite of her fear, the writer knew that she was the heroine of the story, so she said she chose to "open the door, to see outside of my little world," leaving her "kingdom," with "the smiles I used to see, the people I used to care." In the middle of the semester, the same student while working with her group suddenly exclaimed that she now realized the people around her all had "different faces." From a homogeneous to a heterogeneous society, the student began to see herself, as Geertz says, literally "among others."

As autobiography does not have a rigid form, it can serve as "a genre with choice" for ESL students[4]. The students decided what to include, so they made rhetorical choices accordingly. For instance, an immigrant student from Central America was a puzzle to both the instructor and me, for his whole autobiography concentrated on his magic only. More tellingly, he was the only one in class who adopted the model of Western individualism: he had learned magic from no one else but himself. Even my regular interviews could not draw any more information about his life. I learned later from other students that he had other talents and hobbies, and he liked to socialize with others, both American and international. He even performed some magic in class, once officially and once as part of student "underlife." At first I thought that he simply subconsciously adopted the "American Dream," but his insistence on showing only "illusions" forced me to "overread" his text[5]. I recognized a rhetorical gesture in

his mystifying himself as a magician and therefore resisting other definitions of him, like an L2 speaker, or a Hispanic. This gesture was also related to his double consciousness as a consequence of his cultural dislocation and his role as a performer, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" which Du Bois finds in African Americans (Friedman 40). Seeing himself "on stage" gave him a power to manipulate illusions created not only by magic but by language, for his stories developed from his first "silent" show in the U. S. when he could not speak any English word to later shows when he actually made jokes in English.

Compared with these young immigrant students, older writers --in their early and late twenties--more consciously articulated the relation of their experiences to ideologies. Their cross-cultural experiences were such rich resources that they used autobiography more as "a site on which cultural ideologies intersect and dissect one another," though often incoherently (Smith and Watson xix). Quite a few contrasted individualism as opposed to their own ethics of collectivity, some seeing it more positively than others. One student from the former U.S.S.R. illustrated the inevitability of the political in the personal narrative. Just after he said he had "no desire to criticize" Russia, he immediately analyzed the way the Russian Communist Party had controlled its people through dictatorship.

The students' awareness of ideologies was frequently mixed with ambivalence due to their identification with people and

places in their lives. Some female students from Asia wrote how female children's "inferiority" had been instilled in their minds early in life by people no other than their own family members. One student from the Middle East self-consciously admitted that gender differences were "more obvious" in his society, for "gender has some thing to do with the structure of that certain society."

Since these students wrote what they cared for, they got more involved in the process of making themselves understood, which is central to literacy (Brandt). Moreover, the instructor observed that autobiography made the ESL students "do something they have never done before--freewriting. They get loosened up from structured forms." Such loosening corresponded with their willingness to discuss ideologies, both resulting from their mutual trust and the instructor's understanding. As a feminist and experienced ESL teacher, she read her students' texts across language barriers rather than making them "into an Other" (Rodby 122). Actually, the class became a small support group for all to survive their cultural relocations. This sense of community did not end with this class: some became very good friends; most students registered, while writing their autobiographies in this introductory English class, for the immediate English class to be taught by the same teacher in the following semester.

The students' willingness to make connections went beyond writing: many saw their purposes in life more clearly in their later revisions, as writing autobiography helped them "envision"

their future by recalling their past (Tokarczyk). This act of envisioning was best shown in one female student's change of attitude: At first, she worried about whether she had made the right decision to study in the U. S., because after graduation she would be "old" and therefore lose her economic value in her society; but after getting responses from her peers, she wrote, "I don't care about this any more." And her final decision was "to keep this autobiography and let my children read it."

Notes

1 As representative of L1 and L2 specialists in composition studies, the conversation includes Peter Elbow, Patricia Bizzell, Tony Silva, and Terry Santos. The ideas of the students--except Student A--come from my research project, part of which forms the present paper. Student A is based on an article written by Fan Shen. All the words in quotation marks are directly quoted from these sources.

2 See Liebman's "Academic Writing: ESL and NES" other than Silva and Santos.

3 Both Liebman's article and Leki's Understanding ESL Writers review L2 researchers' discussions about the process approach to writing.

4 In their introduction to De/colonizing the Subject, Smith and Watson discuss the generic boundaries of autobiography and its political aspects. Autobiography, they believe, "is at this historical moment a 'genre of choice,' for authors, audiences, and critics" (xviii). Rephrasing their words, I want to show that writing autobiography students have more choices.

5 Miller in her essay "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic" proposes a reading strategy: "To overread [to read for the signature of a gendered, historical self] is also to wonder, as Woolf puts it famously in A Room of One's Own, about the conditions for the production of literature" (43).

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